DOING WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE
July 15, 2001

FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
John M. Buchanan

Even when we try to run away from our troubles, God will find us, and bless us, and even when we feel most alone, unsure if we will survive the night. God will find a way to let us know that he is with us in the this place, wherever we are, however far we think we've run. And maybe that's one reason we worship – to respond to grace. We praise God not to celebrate our own faith but to give thanks for the faith God has in us. To let ourselves look at God and let God look back at us. And to laugh and sing, and be delighted because God has called us to be his own.

Kathleen Norris
Amazing Grace

FOURTH
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke10:25)
Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (NRSV)
Luke 10:25-37 (NRSV)

Dear God, the lawyer's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is our question too. It is why we are here this morning. So, open us again to the surprising news that your love, and our life are gifts: that to receive them we are called to love our neighbors as you have so loved us. Startle us, O God, with that truth, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I suppose I think about the story of the Good Samaritan almost every day of my life. After all, it is not possible to walk down Michigan Avenue, something I do every day, without encountering human need in its variegated expressions: the Streetwise salesman on the corner of Michigan and Delaware, there every day, all day, with his rich, rumbling bass voice, rapping his sales pitch; the amputee sitting on the sidewalk with his hand-lettered sign and tin cup; the children selling M&M's to support their basketball or baseball team, depending on the time of year; the dignified Asian American gentleman seated on a folding chair playing J. S. Bach's Double Violin Concerto with his granddaughter who is standing beside him; the homeless woman, lost in some world that exists only in her head, thoroughly focused on the task of rummaging through the trash basket in search of breakfast.

To negotiate that on a daily basis requires a set of urban skills: finesse, discipline, focus, not to mention physical dexterity. You can't, after all, respond to every need. Besides, who knows which of those needs is authentic? And is there really a basketball team somewhere that benefits from the daily sale of M&M's? Besides, I support my church and my church has a Social Service Center and skilled staff persons, and I support United Way and a shelter for the homeless, and I pay my taxes. And besides, I'm on my way to work and can't afford to stop and deal with each person who needs my help, or I'd never make it to the office.

So, I do what you do. I do what we all do. I pass by on the other side, which is why this 2,000 year old story is one of the best, maybe the best story anyone ever told, and it is why I think about it more than anything else in the Bible.

I read a modern, disturbing version of the story recently. Peter Hawkins, Professor of Religion at Boston College was in New York City to see the one-man performance of *The Gospel According to Mark.* As he and his companion emerged from the theater, they were stunned by the beauty and power of the story of Jesus—exhilarated. Suddenly the door of

a tavern opened and a very drunk man stumbled out and collapsed in front of them. "What would Jesus do?" "With the *Gospel of Mark* ringing in my ears, it was not possible to do what one normally does in New York when a door opens and someone hurtles forth. The challenge of the Parable of the Good Samaritan was palpable in the air that night. Of such is the Kingdom of God."

So they picked up the drunk, took him by cab to his gorgeous Upper Eastside townhouse, managed to open the door and get him inside. But the drunk didn't want their help—wasn't interested in the Kingdom of God coming. Hawkins remembers, "He wanted a drink; he wanted a smoke; he didn't care if he burned the whole building down; he wanted us to get the hell out."

It was clearly time to go, but Hawkins recalls they were stuck inside the parable along with the Samaritan. So they managed to commandeer an address book and started to call the man's friends only to hear the same answer: "he's a spoiled, arrogant, abusive bully—and a drunk. "Forget about it." So before they tiptoed out, Hawkins left his card and a note. "Please call if you'd like to talk."

The man never did. No thank you note. No good neighbor award. Nothing. Hawkins concludes his account enigmatically. "Nonetheless, I wonder now if I stepped into eternal life without knowing it—by doing, however grudgingly, what had to be done." (*The Christian Century,* June 20-27, 2001, "The Samaritan Spends the Night.")

What prompted Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan was a question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's a pretty good question: a question everyone asks sooner or later. The one who asked it was a lawyer; skilled at asking questions in order to get information, but also in order to entangle and implicate. Jesus knows the lawyer knows the conventional answer to the question, so he responds with "What does the law say? You're a lawyer." " . . . You shall love the Lord your God with heart, soul, strength and mind—and your neighbor as yourself." Everybody knew that. Judaism had already combined love of God and love of neighbor. But there always remained a vexing question: "But who exactly is my neighbor?" The law seemed to say—your neighbor is your fellow Jew, someone very like you.

Then comes the story about a man, a Jew, walking down the treacherous 17 mile road from Jerusalem to Jericho, who was attacked, robbed, beaten, stripped naked, and left to die at the side of the road. A priest, walking the same route, saw him, and passed by on the other side. A Levite, an assistant in the Temple, did the same thing—saw the poor man and stepped around him. Why didn't they stop and at least see if the man was dead or alive so they could report the incident to the authorities? The reasons are the same reasons you and I employ on Michigan Avenue. These are not bad people. If the priest stops and touches the man and if he's dead, the priest is ceremonially unclean. He has no choice but to turn around, go back to Jerusalem, find and purchase a red heifer, arrange for it to be sacrificed and reduced to ashes and then go stand outside the East Gate of the city wall

with other sinners for one week. Then he can resume his journey. The Levite is probably on his way to a very important meeting.

The brilliance of this story is that these people act like you and I would. And also the story inverts a more conventional model of ethical exhortation. The story should be about a good Jew who stops to help a hated, racially and religiously inferior Samaritan. Everybody would understand that and nod in agreement. But a Samaritan? A Good Samaritan? There is no such thing. For seven hundred years these people have been a thorn in the flesh: an obstinate bunch of racial half-breeds with a watered down form of our religion and their own substitute Temple. There is no such thing as a Good Samaritan.

Who, Jesus asked the lawyer? Who was a good neighbor? And the lawyer—now trapped—had to say—"Why, the one who showed mercy—the Samaritan."

This started out as a discussion of how to get to heaven. And then it detoured into defining the neighbor I must love, but now it is about being a neighbor. We've moved from knowing—to being; from abstractions to specificity.

Let's think for a moment about some of this innocent little story's larger implications.

Social theorists know that there is something potentially diabolical about the human self that needs some "other"—some stranger, outcast, inferior—in order to establish its own identity.

Jew—Samaritan
Christian—Arab Infidel
German—Jew
White—Black
In Belfast, Protestant—Catholic.

Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf, describes the ethnic hostility between Croatian Catholics, Serbian Orthodox and Bosnian Muslims in terms that gave the 20th century perhaps the ugliest phrase in the English language—"Ethnic Cleansing." In Sarajevo, Volf reports, that ethnic and religious hatred is so deep that even the clocks in the bell towers of churches are set differently—to define Croatian time and Serbian time. In an incident I will never forget, my friend, Steve Kurtz, a Presbyterian mission worker in Ocijek, Croatia, was driving me out of Ocijek—into Serbian controlled countryside. Steve had his clerical collar on. As we left the Croatian military check point and headed across the bridge toward the Serbian checkpoint, Steve frantically ripped off his collar and stuffed it under the seat. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Oh," he said, "we do that all the time. The Croatians think I'm a Catholic priest and let me through with no hassle. But that thing could get me killed, or at least detained for a very long time, on the other side."

Left to our own devices, human culture needs an "other"—an outsider, to define insiders: a sinner to define the "righteous;" someone to be weak and helpless—to define who is good

and strong. And the great debate in this country continues to be about who is responsible to care for and about the "other," the "outsider;" the socially and economically disadvantaged; the poor.

The late Lewis Thomas, head of the Sloane Kettering Cancer Clinic, used to say that a society can be judged on the basis of how it deals with its poorest and weakest and sickest and smallest. The President's Faith Based Initiative—to route federal money to religious organizations to provide services to the neediest is, of course, a way of addressing that issue. It is not without its problems. Constitutional scholars and experts are arguing and discussing and debating and lining up on either side, for or against. What I hope is that we not lose sight of the fact that there are no more resources being proposed to help needy people, just a different way of expending them. In fact, the administration proposes reductions. And, in the middle of the church-state constitutional debate, I hope we do not lose sight of a sense of community responsibility for one another: for the neediest among us; that privatization of welfare by depending on churches and synagogues and mosques is not a device to excuse the community, the body politic, from the responsibility to care for its needy. I hope we do not lose sight of the hard reality that regardless of our good intentions and our compassion, there are not enough of us and we do not have the resources to address the enormous problems of poverty and education and health. And further, that as much as both we and the government like to think that religious organizations are more effective deliverers of social services than secular or government agencies, there is no real evidence that such is the case.

In the meantime, there is a real concern that our infatuation with the market economy as the final arbiter of what is good and effective and necessary—is already changing the way we think about our common responsibilities. University of Chicago's Jean Bethke Elshtain, a conservative, observes how the older language—"justice, virtue, charity, ethics, public-mindedness, falls by the wayside in favor of relentless commodification." (*Who Are We?* p.57) Have you noticed how our vocabulary has changed? How—in the new era of market driven managed care—hospital patients are now routinely called consumers; how medical care is thus commodified—a product to be purchased; how cost effectiveness and the bottom line has now taken control so that hospital stays are determined not by out-of-date considerations such as a doctor's concern that a patient needs another day or two of care, but a management team's sense of economic viability?

The story of the Good Samaritan is a reminder that over against the Grand Narrative of culture that defines who is in and who is out, us and them, there is an alternative narrative, a narrative of reconciliation and compassion and mercy for all people. It is a narrative based on the life and teachings of Jesus and his notion that eternal life, true life in all its depth and fullness and joy—belongs to those who love and care and show mercy—those who, when confronted with human need, do what has to be done.

Miroslav Volf, writing in what seems like the impossibly conflicted and hopeless situation in his own country, writes: "We need the grand vision of life filled with the Spirit of God. We need reminders that the impossible is possible . . . But along with grand visions, we

need stories of small successful steps of learning to live together. The grand vision and the small stories will together keep us on the journey." (*Exclusion and Embrace,* p.230-231)

After seeing the motion picture, *Pearl Harbor,* I thought about a small story that happened here. After Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans were in a difficult place. Feelings ran very deeply: hostility, hatred, racism were common in all of life: newspapers, movies, radio. A small group of Japanese American Christians had been worshipping together in Chicago, but after Pearl Harbor, they lost their place of worship and restrictions were placed on gatherings of Japanese Americans. The small community came to Fourth Presbyterian Church and asked permission to worship in this building. The Pastor, Harrison Ray Anderson, a strong patriot, a World War I veteran, knew what he had to do. He proposed that the Session grant permission to the Japanese American congregation to meet and worship at Fourth Presbyterian Church. John Mulder was Clerk of Session. His son, John, is currently President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and remembers his father's account: The meeting was tumultuous. Strong feelings were expressed; the discussion was heated and lengthy. In the end, the vote was taken and permission granted, and the small Japanese American congregation met in the John Timothy Stone Chapel at 2:00 on Sunday afternoons all during World War II. Not everybody thought it was a good idea. It was a controversial decision within the church and the community. Harsh things were said. There were threats. Anderson responded by showing up outside Stone Chapel, on Delaware, before 2:00, to greet the Japanese American worshippers as they arrived.

The little congregation grew: their Sunday afternoon services were moved into Westminster Chapel—now appropriately Anderson Hall—and in 1947 became Christ Church Presbyterian, a Japanese American congregation which remains part of the Presbytery of Chicago.

A small story. But an eloquent reminder of the Grand Vision, that Kingdom of God in which all are welcome, all are included, all are cared for and loved, that Kingdom in which a radical new truth is lived, namely that eternal life, real, true, authentic human life, life given, blessed and forever kept safe in the heart of God, is given to those who love, who live for others, who give their lives away.

You know, this story began with a very personal question—about personal salvation. This is not about social action, finally. It is about you and me—our lives—our hopes—our fulfillment—our salvation.

I wonder if the lawyer who asked the question ever realized, as he heard this remarkable story, that the Good Samaritan was standing right in front of him.

That, finally, is the word here. He comes to be with us, to the road-side, to wherever we are, and whenever we are on the outside looking in, whenever we are rejected or alone or sick in spirit, or working so hard our lives seem to be slipping through our fingers, asking in quiet desperation: "What must I do to live?"

He comes. Jesus Christ comes to pick us up and bind up our wounds, and bring us home to our true and best self, to live again, fully, generously, gratefully, loving God and the neighbor who needs us, doing what has to be done.

Amen.

Prayers of the People

By Carol J. Allen, Associate Pastor for Congregational Care

O God, our creator, we thank you for this earth, our home; "for the wide sky and the blessed sun, for the salt sea and the running water, for the everlasting hills and never-resting winds . . ."; for the stretch of our bodies, the reach of our minds; for healing medicines and healing laughter. "Grant us a heart wide open to all this beauty, and save our souls from being so blind that we pass unseeing when even the [commonplace] is aflame with your glory."* For all artists, musicians, entertainers, and scholars we remember, we thank you, O God. For all who celebrate in what they do and say the resiliency of the human spirit and who turn our attention to signs of your love in the world, we offer up our praise.

In this very context of your world's wonder and beauty, O God, in Jesus Christ you set your face to go to Jerusalem, to suffer and die and be born again. You continue to invite us to join you on this journey to this very day. Wherever the world lies wounded, wrecked, and tangled up in sin and death, you listen to the groans and whisper to those who stand and watch, "Return to the source of life."

Where men and women separate themselves from the struggles of others for bread and dignity, where children are abandoned and lost, where self-identity is discounted, and color and gender made a basis for exclusion and injustice, you turn and whisper, "Return to the source of life."**

Turn our faces toward you, O God, who is the source of our life. Shape our prayers and direct our actions on behalf of those for whom life does not mean freedom: youngsters caught up in gangs, persons addicted to drugs or drink, those who are bursting with stifled intelligence, prisoners of conscience, those coming through the waters of grief and loss, all who suffer at the hands of others or who cause suffering. Turn our faces and direct our actions on behalf of those who are suffering with difficult decisions, exhausted in caring for others, anxious about the future, spirits dimmed by fear. Give each, kind God, comfort and courage and peace in their hearts. Bring inward freedom in the midst of circumstances that keep any one of us captive.

Be among us with your power, holy God. You have instructed us to live as loving neighbors. Though we are scattered in different places, speak different words, or descend from different cultures, we pray to be one people who share the governing of the world under your guiding purposes. Help us to be firm and resolute in doing those things that lie before us. Help us to overcome difficulties and persevere in spite of failures. When we are weary and disheartened and ready to give in, fill us with fresh strength and keep us faithful to our calling in and through the church to do our part in putting an end to greed and war and curbing the lust for power, in order that all may enter the community of your love promised in Jesus Christ.***

Bless this nation and all nations with your wisdom, sovereign God, so the poor may not be denied their basic needs and the rich may not live at the expense of others. Make this a

nation that has no ruler except you, O God, and no authority save that of love. As a people made bold in your image, hear us as we pray in the way Jesus taught his followers to pray, saying these words: Our Father . . .

* Adapted and quoted from Walter Rauschenbusch.
**Adapted from "Sacraments and Seasons," Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
***Adapted from *Worship Book.*